



# NEWS RELEASE

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Office of Public Affairs, 377th Air Base Wing, 2000 Wyoming Blvd. S.E.  
Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico 87117-5606, (505) 846-5991. DSN 246-5991

96-127  
Oct. 17, 1996

## Levitow Shares Thoughts on Medal of Honor

By Tech. Sgt. William M. Rhodes  
377th Air Base Wing Public Affairs

**Note:** John L. Levitow, the only Air Force Enlisted Medal of Honor recipient, visited Kirtland Air Force Base as the guest speaker for the Enlisted Dining-In Sept. 27. The following story is based on an interview given earlier that day.

**KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE, N.M.** — For this grounded Air Force crew member in 1969, life wasn't particularly fun. When you're flying over the jungles of South Vietnam, no mission was routine. At any minute the skies could erupt into segments of hell. With a little more than a year left in the Air Force, this Airman First Class (E-4) was nursing wounds from such a mission when the ringing of the telephone broke into his world of solitude.

Thirty minutes after the first phone call, his squadron commander approached him, abruptly asking if he just hung up on a colonel. It was at this moment when John L. Levitow learned the truth about his future.

On Feb. 24 that same year, Levitow was serving as loadmaster when his aircraft was severely damaged by 82mm mortar fire over Long Binh. Suffering from more than 40 shrapnel wounds in his back and legs, he observed a magnesium flare, thrown by the mortar blast, amid a jumble of spilled ammunition canisters.

Despite loss of blood and partial loss of feeling in his right leg, he threw himself on the deadly device, hugged it close, dragged himself to the open cargo door, and hurled the flare through it. The flare

- more -

## LEVITOW 2-2-2

ignited in the air in almost the same instant. His selfless act saved the crew and aircraft from almost certain death and destruction.

Because of his heroic efforts, he became the lowest ranking airman in history to earn the Medal of Honor.

“I hung up on the colonel twice. At the time I didn’t think he was funny. I thought he was lying, that he thought it was all a joke,” Levitow said.

Originally put in for the Air Force Cross, the caller, from 7th Air Force headquarters, was trying to inform him that the medal (Air Force Cross) had fallen through.

According to Levitow his response was “win some, lose some.”

“Hey, I’m a first-term airman, I could have cared less.” “And then, all of a sudden, he said it’s been upgraded. I knew what that meant. I said, ‘I don’t think this is funny,’ and hung up on him. A couple of minutes later the same guy called and I did the exactly same thing. I hung up a second time. I didn’t think it was true until my commander confirmed it,” Levitow explained.

After his departure from Vietnam, the future Medal of Honor recipient went on to Norton Air Force Base, Calif., where he continued flying in C-141s until his discharge from the Air Force.

After 30 days he received another phone call, this time from the Department of the Air Force, requesting his presence in Washington. “For about a week and a half before the flight, I didn’t know what I was going to Washington for,” Levitow said.

“The Medal of Honor can be downgraded at any stage. Although it had gone in at the medal, I could have been coming down for the Air Force Cross,” he explained. “Until I read the actual citation, I didn’t even know what I did.”

“Instinctively, I knew I’d been hit with something. I knew I had wounded people, myself being one of them. I was helping the gunner forward and I heard the pilot yell, ‘What happened, did a flare go off?’ The last thing I remember is we were getting ready to drop a flare, I looked around and it was that problem. And I started moving. From that moment on, I don’t remember anything until we’re touching down and I’m throwing ammo cans between the guns of the airplane because I was afraid we were going to do ground loops and I didn’t want 200-pound ammo cans flying around killing people. You don’t remember these

### **LEVITOW 3-3-3**

things.

“I felt awkward, did I really deserve it? Until you’re standing there and having the President of the United States pin something around your neck, then you’re in shock. It really doesn’t become a reality until shortly afterwards,” Levitow said.

Following the medal ceremony, Levitow was asked by the Air Force if he wanted to return to service. He turned it down for civilian life, a decision he says he doesn’t regret.

Currently, the director of planning for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Connecticut, Levitow stills visits many Air Force bases for various functions. Because he is the only enlisted Medal of Honor recipient, Levitow says he and the Air Force had to come to a mutual understanding of how these trips worked out.

One of the things Levitow notices on these trips is the breakdown of the barrier between the officer and enlisted ranks. “There’s a better respect for one another. That respect has made the Air Force the key service to be in,” he stated.

Training is another topic he frequently discusses with younger airman. “The Air Force wants an educated person. If you don’t want to continue your education, you’d might as well get out.

“It’s just a matter of utilizing all the training you can get. You never know when you’re going to need it. And I can justify the fact that I’m here today because I was fortunate enough to be trained properly,” Levitow said.

It was former Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Sam E. Parish who approached Levitow with the idea of naming an award in his honor. Levitow said he thought it was for a “one-time use only.” Little did he know that his name would become the most recognized name in the Air Force associated with Medal of Honor.

He credits the Air Force Sergeants Association for helping him adapt to the pressures of being an E-4 with the Medal of Honor.

Levitow is one of 174 living recipients who belong to the Medal of Honor Society, based in Patriots Point, South Carolina.

Members are recipients from World War II, Korea and the Vietnam War. The latter currently

## **LEVITOW 4-4-4**

comprise the majority because of the age factor of living members. In 1970, when Levitow received his medal, there were 440 living recipients.

“Ultimately, I belong to the Last Man’s Club. We don’t expect anymore (medals of honor) because of the issue of combat. And I don’t believe there is a recipient walking in this country that wants another one issued,” Levitow said.

Levitow said, “I honestly believe I should be the second enlisted recipient. Pitsenbarger should be the first.

On April 11, 1966, 21-year old A1C William H. Pitsenbarger of Piqua, Ohio, was killed while defending some of his wounded comrades. For his bravery and sacrifice, he was posthumously awarded the nation’s second highest military decoration, the Air Force Cross.

“Pits”, as he was known to his friends, was nearing his 300th combat mission on that fateful day when some men of the U.S. Army’s 1st Division were ambushed and pinned down in an area about 45 miles east of Saigon.

Two HH-43 “Huskie” helicopters of the USAF’s 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron were rushed to the scene to lift out the wounded. Pits was a pararescueman (PJ) on one of them.

Upon reaching the site of the ambush, Pits was lowered through the trees to the ground, where he attended to the wounded before having them lifted to the helicopter by cable.

After six wounded men had been flown to an aid station, the two USAF helicopters returned for their second loads. As one of them lowered its litter basket to Pitsenbarger, who had remained on the ground with the 20 infantrymen still alive, it was hit by a burst of enemy small-arms fire.

When its engine began to lose power, the pilot realized he had to get the Huskie away from the area as soon as possible. Instead of climbing into the litter basket so he could leave with the helicopter, Pits elected to remain with the Army troops under enemy attack and he gave a “wave-off” to the helicopter which flew away to safety.

Pits continued to treat the wounded and, when the others began running low on ammunition, he gathered ammo clips from the dead and distributed them to those still alive. Then, he joined the others with a rifle to hold off the Viet Cong.

**- more -**

## **LEVITOW 5-5-5**

About 7:30 that evening, Bill Pitsenbarger was killed by Viet Cong snipers. When his body was recovered the next day, one hand still held a rifle and the other a medical kit.

Now here's a PJ that gave his life. He did more in my estimation than what minor little accomplishment that I had, but I was alive.

"Now, I don't want to say its politics, that's wrong. I'm just saying for the Air Force, they may have capitalized on the fact that I was alive versus deceased.

"I think I would love for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force or somebody to turn around and open it up and I'd be glad to be number two."

**- 30 -**

**Note to Editors:** for information about this news release, contact Senior Airman Paul Gritton, 846-7019 or 846-5991.